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The "Secret War": Myths, Morals, and Misconceptions

In April 1961, shortly after the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy remarked:

> Any unilateral American intervention, in the absence of an external attack upon ourselves or an ally, would have been contrary to our traditions and to our international obligations.

However, the President continued, our nation faces a "relentless struggle" in which armies and nuclear weapons

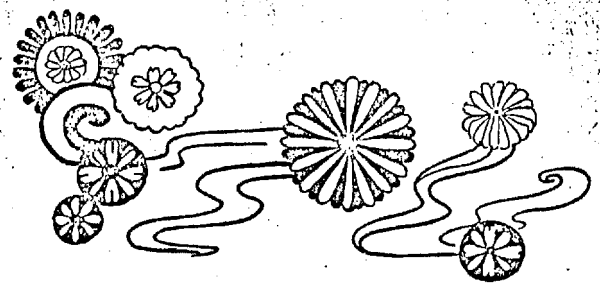
> . . . serve primarily as a shield behind which subversion, infiltration, and a host of other tactics steadily advance, picking off vulnerable areas one by one in situations which do not permit our own armed intervention.

The nature of this "new and deeper struggle," he concluded, meant that traditional military instruments were no longer sufficient to protect our national security, and that as a nation we must "profit from this lesson" and "re-examine and reorient our forces of all kinds, our tactics and other institutions."

To many people, surprised at the obvious role of the United States in the effort to overthrow the Castro regime, the implicit suggestion that our government should actively pursue a policy of covert political intervention was disturbing. It seemed strangely inconsistent that a government which professed to base its foreign policy on the principles of international law, self-determination, and the peaceful settlement of conflict—and which castigated its adversaries for failing to do the same—should openly advocate such a policy.

This apparent duplicity, and the more fundamental dilemma of how to justify covert interference in the affairs of other nations, has aroused

considerable concern. In 1947, Hanson Baldwin wrote: "To most Americans the idea of an espionage system is abhorrent, at least in times of peace. . . . It smacks too much of hypocrisy and poses hidden dangers to the social system." More recently, the authors of the widely-read book *The Invisible Government* declared: "An informed citizen might come to suspect that the foreign policy of the United States often works publicly in one direction and secretly through the Invisible Government in just the opposite direction."



The organizational framework for this "invisible government," as the intelligence community has been referred to, derives from the National Security Act of 1947. The Act established the National Security Council and authorized it "to assess and appraise the objectives, commitments, and risks of the United States in relation to our actual and potential military power." The Central Intelligence Agency, established by the same law, was designated as the leader of the intelligence system organized to implement the goals and purposes of the NSC.

Yet, in addition to the collection, collation and evaluation of intelligence information, the role of the CIA has greatly expanded since 1947 to include responsibility for covert political operations abroad. It is this expansion of the function of the CIA which underlies most of the public concern with U.S. covert activities. Even former President Truman, who supervised the founding of the agency, has stated recently: "For some time I have been disturbed by the way the CIA has been diverted from its original assignments. It has become an operational and at times a policy-making arm of the government."

The growth of the size and role of the CIA has been recorded at great length by numerous writers, among them Sanche de Gramont in *The Secret War*, H. H. Ransom in *Central Intelligence and National Security*, Tully in *CIA, The Inside Story*, and P. W. Blackstock in *The Strategy*

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of Subversion. Estimates of the Agency's annual budget have ranged from $750,000,000 to over $1,000,000,000, and the number of American personnel employed has been placed anywhere from 9,000 to 12,000. The techniques employed in its operations include propaganda, bribery, espionage, subversion, and para-military operations. Its covert missions have been conducted throughout the world, and have included coups in Iraq and Guatemala, the support of anti-Communist rebels in Indonesia and Burma, and well-publicized mishaps such as the U-2 incident and the Bay of Pigs invasion. Over the post-war period, the intelligence and operational responsibilities of this large, secret bureaucracy have clearly become of major importance in making and implementing our national policies and strategies.

In spite of the importance of the CIA and its operational responsibilities, there has been a remarkable absence of thoughtful and responsible criticism of the role it does and should play in the conduct of American foreign policy. Apart from a relatively small number of scholarly works, public discussion has been characterized by an ill-informed confusion of moral, technical, and policy questions. Furthermore, these have generally been embedded in journalistic discourse, seldom with as much documentation as sensational conjecture.

The most persistent refrain which one hears is that disguised intervention is usually unwarranted, illegal, and inconsistent with stated American purposes. Yet such a simplistic approach to covert operations is not only fruitless, but misleading. Just as the United States cannot unilaterally resign from the Cold War, it is unrealistic to insist that it adhere to a rigid policy of non-intervention. "Intervention is often a necessity," points out H. Bradford Westerfield in *The Instruments of America's Foreign Policy.* "Discreet circumspection and genuine respect for diversity of political systems are not to be equated with paralyzing inhibitions and self-doubt on the part of Americans in the midst of the Cold War."

In the present struggle, we are confronted with an adversary who has greatly expanded the traditional range of secret operations to include highly sophisticated techniques of international political and social conflict. Communist agents are operating in nearly every country of the world, utilizing all the means at their disposal to reduce American prestige and power and to substitute it with their own. As we are prepared to combat Communist expansionism with traditional military, economic, and diplomatic means, we should also be prepared to use the techniques of covert political warfare.

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It is also difficult to see the relevance of "morality" to the issue of whether to employ covert operations in the implementation of our foreign policy. The nature of the struggle in which we are engaged has meant that generally accepted standards of ethical and moral behavior are inapplicable. "A good deal of trouble," former Secretary of State Dean Acheson has remarked, "comes from the anthropomorphic urge to regard nations as individuals and apply to our own national conduct vague maxims for individual conduct—for instance the Golden Rule—even though in practice individuals rarely adopt it."

In assessing the value of covert operations, the more pertinent question is whether a particular activity contributes to or detracts from the attainment of a national goal or purpose. This is not to say that one should cynically adopt the principle that the ends justify the means in foreign policy, but rather that—in the words of Mr. Acheson—"only the end can justify the means." In other words, the decision to rely upon covert intervention in a given situation should be judged solely in relation to its intended objective and to the consequences which would result if it were not employed.

There is another reason why all the major governments of the world have at one time or another concluded that covert political operations are an acceptable instrument of foreign policy. The employment of such operations permits a flexibility which is essential for self-protection. In the words of a former CIA agent, and the author of *A Short Course in the Secret War*, covert operations permit

> . . . the pursuit of constructive, progressive policies on the overt level while preserving, on the covert level, the national safety and interest intact until more idealistic overt policies have produced concrete results.

The fact that covert activities are deemed preferable to direct confrontations of power also explains why their use has traditionally received the tacit approval of competing world powers. Moreover, it also helps to explain the strict observance of another established custom. A covert hostile act which has been exposed can be ignored by the victimized state only so long as the government responsible cooperates. It is essential, therefore, that a nation conducting a covert mission disclaim any knowledge or participation once it has been uncovered.

While it is unwise to reject categorically the use of covert political operations, it is equally unwise to permit such a potentially explosive instrument of American foreign policy to escape critical examination. There is a clear need for an objective appraisal of the "secret war"

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being conducted by the United States and of the problems it raises. Constitutionally, there is the problem of reconciling the demands of national security with those of our form of government; on the level of policy making, there is the question of whether covert intervention represents the most effective means of achieving our national aims; and operationally, there are problems concerning the effective management, control, and execution of covert missions.

One of the fundamental principles of our democracy is that the government should rest on the "consent of the governed," and that the citizen or at least his representatives be as informed as possible. Yet how can there be any meaningful consent, asks *The Invisible Government,* "where those who are governed do not know to what they are consenting?" Obviously, it would make no sense to reveal the details of secret intelligence operations to the public. The real question, explored in great depth by Harry Howe Ransom in *Can American Democracy Survive Cold War?,* is how to preserve a delicate balance between the requirements of national security and the need for adequate Congressional supervision.

At the present time, Congressional surveillance of an indirect nature is being carried out by four subcommittees of the House and Senate, but this supervision has been notably perfunctory. Since 1956 proposals have been made almost annually for the establishment of a well-staffed, joint Congressional committee on intelligence. In response to mounting public concern it seems likely that such a committee, modeled after the Joint Atomic Energy Committee, will be established within a few years.

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While persuasive arguments can be made for or against such a committee, the burden of evidence would seem to favor increased surveillance. Apart from protecting the public interest, a joint Congressional committee could perform at least two important functions. In the first place, a permanent committee could provide essential support for the intelligence community, protecting as well as promoting its interests. If more information concerning the planning and conduct of intelligence missions were made available, it would bolster badly shaken confidence in the intelligence services. Such a committee could also take steps to encourage a greater understanding of the role and purposes of covert operations in American foreign policy by the public and relevant government agencies.

Secondly, the success of covert operations can be seriously threatened by the existence of *a priori* assumptions which impair the clear judgment and essential objectivity needed for their planning. The fact that "prejudice is the most serious occupational hazard we have in intelligence work" is frankly admitted by Allen Dulles. An important role of increased Congressional surveillance, and of the feeling of external responsibility it would engender in the intelligence community, would be to foster a greater degree of introspection and self-criticism with which to counteract this danger.

Since responsibility for covert intelligence operations will continue to be primarily under the purview of a select number of officials in the Executive Branch, it is essential that these officials have a clear understanding of the foreign policy instrument they are dealing with. The decision to employ covert intervention to achieve a particular policy objective involves considerable risks in comparison with other policy instruments. The prospects for the success of a secret operation must be carefully weighed against the costs of failures—not the least of which is the danger of an embarrassing disclosure of American participation.

Nevertheless, several critics of U.S. intelligence activities have claimed that those responsible for their conduct have overestimated the capabilities of covert political warfare. One of the sharpest critics of U.S. policymakers in this regard is Paul Blackstock, who has charged in *The Strategy of Subversion* that "in the crusading ideological atmosphere of the Cold War, this instrument of policy was eagerly seized upon and used with little understanding of its effectiveness or its limitations."

While such criticism seems inordinately severe, one wonders whether U.S. officials have not on occasion resorted to overt intervention either out of a sense of frustration or because of a hesitancy to employ overt

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diplomatic, economic or military means in order to accomplish their purpose. The Bay of Pigs invasion—a covert operation of such dimensions that it probably should never have been attempted as such—may indeed have been motivated by a desire to avoid the consequences of open military intervention. Similarly, the covert support of the anti-Communist rebellion in Indonesia in 1957-58 may have been undertaken in the mistaken belief that this would succeed where overt means had apparently failed.

In this regard, one might also argue that U.S. officials have misunderstood the nature of the forces at work in many of the emerging nations of the world. Too often there seems to be a tendency to underestimate the importance of real social and political grievances in these nascent societies and to attribute the existence of instability, violence, and demands for radical change to subversion and political intrigue. To conclude that covert intervention to shore up an amenable regime offers a lasting solution to the difficult and complex problems which these countries face is a mistake. Indeed, many of our present difficulties in Vietnam seem to stem from such an over-simplification.

This objection is not meant to imply that covert intervention to preserve an established regime may not occasionally be expedient or even exemplary. But one might well question the ultimate contribution to our foreign policy goals of U.S. support of Nationalist Chinese rebels in Burma in the early 1950's, the U.S.-inspired coup in Guatemala in 1954, or the months of intrigue which took place in Laos after the Geneva Agreement of 1962—all of which concluded in what was substantially a return to the status quo, leaving only a residue of ill-will and bitterness toward the U.S. government.

Another major criticism of U.S. intelligence operations is the often heard charge that the CIA autonomously conducts its own policies. In response to such claims, Allen Dulles has emphasized in *The Craft of Intelligence*:

> The facts are that the CIA has never carried out any action of a political nature, given any support of any nature to any persons, potentates or movements, political or otherwise, without appropriate approval at a high political level in our government outside the CIA.

This fact is further substantiated by President Kennedy's unqualified support of John Richardson, head of CIA operations in Vietnam until the end of 1963, at a time when CIA activities in that country were being severely criticized by the press.

Although there is no evidence that the CIA has ever consciously

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disregarded Executive authority, it does seem likely that the Agency has somethimes operated in a policy vacuum. One is reminded of the decision to continue the U-2 flights immediately prior to the scheduled Summit Conference in 1960, of the unfulfilled promises made to the Cuban refugees preparing for the Bay of Pigs, and of the recent disclosure that President Kennedy ordered a large shipment of Cuban sugar, destined for the Soviet Union, to be replaced after it had been rendered useless by CIA agents. In such instances, the solution lies not in drastic reform—as some liberal critics suggest—but in strong leadership, clear policies authoritatively stated, and competent personnel.

The continued use of covert political operations by the United States will undoubtedly pose troublesome questions of conscience. Yet while overt diplomatic instruments are probably preferable, it is unrealistic to expect our government to abstain from the use of covert intervention when no alternative exists simply on the basis that it is "unethical." The more fundamental problem is how to assure that covert operations are conducted effectively, realistically and in a manner as consistent as possible with our form of government. U.S. experience with such operations in the post-war period, however, suggests that these standards have not always been met.

It does not necessarily follow from such an interpretation that our intelligence apparatus should be subject to drastic organizational reforms or that existing procedures for control and surveillance be radically altered. Nevertheless, it does call for one basic element of change—that there be a greater understanding of the nature and conduct of covert political operations.

On the part of those officials responsible, this means a deeper appreciation of the principles governing the employment of such operations, a recognition of their limitations and capabilities, and a more realistic appraisal of the contribution which they can make to our national aims. For the public, there must be an increased recognition of the reasons for conducting covert operations, greater confidence in the competence of the intelligence services, and an awareness of why they must be kept secret.

President Kennedy once remarked to the intelligence community: "Your successes are unheralded; your failures are trumpeted." A deeper appreciation of the role which covert operations play in U.S. foreign policy would serve to prevent ill-informed and purely emotional criticism in the event of failure or error. More importantly, it would encourage the tacit—but essential—public support for these vital operations.